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# The Arts, Civic Engagement, and the “Tragedy of the Commons”

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Mark Stern, SIAP co-founder and principal investigator since 1994, delivered this talk at the Americans for the Arts conference in Philadelphia in June 2008.

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# The Arts, Civic Engagement, and the “Tragedy of the Commons”

## **Abstract**

In this essay, historian Mark Stern uses the metaphor of “the tragedy of the commons” to reflect on the rewards and frustrations of conducting research on the social and community impacts of the arts. He suggests that thinking about community culture as a “field”—rather than as a collection of individual programs—might prevent the logic of the commons from killing the many benefits the arts and culture can bring to communities and their residents.

## **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Civic and Community Engagement | Politics and Social Change

## **Comments**

Mark Stern, SIAP co-founder and principal investigator since 1994, delivered this talk at the Americans for the Arts conference in Philadelphia in June 2008.

The arts, civic engagement, and the “tragedy of the commons”  
Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert  
University of Pennsylvania  
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For more than a decade, we have been conducting research on the impact of the community culture sector on Philadelphia’s neighborhoods and region. Much of this experience has been hugely rewarding. Through our research project—the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP)—we have come to understand a lot about the basic building blocks of community and the role that the arts and culture can play in bringing vitality to neighborhoods, whatever their economic status.

Yet, the research has not been without its frustrations, one of the most persistent of which has been our inability to get cultural organizations to collect even basic information on those who come to their events and participate in their programs. Even when we were evaluating a foundation initiative to promote cultural participation, many grantees simply neglected to record the names and addresses of participants.

Our first reaction to this situation was to assume that the problem was one of personal failing—“human error” as the media likes to put it. But over time, we’ve come to realize that the problem is more deeply embedded in how community arts functions as a sector. Understanding our “failure” tells us something systemic, which shifts both how we think about the problem and its possible solution.

In these remarks, we want to discuss the potential benefits of documenting involvement in community arts programs and the nature of the “costs” that prevent this from happening as frequently as it should. In doing so, we will use the idea of “the tragedy of the commons” as a way of talking about some current dilemmas facing small arts organizations and some changes in thinking that might alleviate them. In particular, we want to make the point that thinking about community culture as a “field”—rather than as a collection of individual programs—might prevent the logic of the commons from killing the many benefits that the arts can bring to communities and their residents.

#### **SIAP’s Approach to Studying Civic Impacts**

The Social Impact of the Arts Project started with a very simple premise: if the arts make such a big difference in the lives of communities and regions, one should be able to measure it. Begun at a time when “economic impact” studies had become fashionable, we wanted to study the non-economic impact of the arts on communities.

With this simple premise, we developed a method that we have continued to use. The key challenge of this research approach was to decide on the appropriate “unit of analysis” and to develop a strategy for how to gather information on both the presence of the arts and cultural activities and a set of possible outcomes for that unit.

Most studies had chosen units of analysis that were either too small or too large. By far the most common unit of analysis was the individual—how did individual in-

volvement in arts and cultural activity transform people. When studies looked elsewhere, they typically chose as the unit of analysis the city or metropolitan area. We found both of these approaches to have problems.

The idea of individual transformation appears to be incredibly appealing to advocates for the arts. A person sees a work of art, reads a poem, makes a pot, and—boom—they have a new view of the world! This didn’t seem to be a very persuasive argument sociologically. Indeed, starting with David Halle’s book—*Inside Culture*—we find that disagreement, suspicion, and indifference appear to be most people’s reaction to most art.

The alternative was usually to look at the metropolitan area to find influences, an approach that has value in providing a lay of the land, as in Judith Blau’s pioneering study, *The Shape of Culture*. But it is difficult to move much beyond description. Like much indicator research, looking at the phenomenon at this scale typically makes it impossible to explain the causal links between cultural engagement and other impacts. One is left with a kind of “it’s in the water” explanation.

In our work, we have found it more worthwhile to think about the social impact of the arts as essentially a *collective* process. Here there are a variety of possibilities for how the arts could influence a community. First, arts and culture can function as an *amenity*. A mural, a theater company, or an arts school is community asset that improves community life. Second, arts institutions—like other forms of civic engagement—can improve connections among community residents—what Sampson and Earls have called “collective efficacy.” Finally, we’ve discovered that the arts generate a unique pattern of participation; eighty percent of the participants in local arts programs come from outside the program’s neighborhood. Because culture is a multi-dimensional experience, these regional connections tend to be deep and complicated. We’ve often seen first-hand a kind of spiritual connection that often binds community cultural providers and their participants. It defies cost/benefit analysis in any narrow sense, which is why we’ve referred to these providers as “irrational” organizations.

The key to our documentation of the civic impact of the arts has been rather simple. We collect participant records of cultural organizations, geo-code and aggregate them, and then connect them with other data on social well-being drawn from government and other sources. This allows us to identify areas of the city with high levels of cultural engagement, find associations with those areas’ social characteristics and map changes in those characteristics over time. Our signature finding—that high levels of cultural engagement are a leading indicator of a neighborhood’s economic revitalization—flows from this type of analysis.

Frankly, we originally believed that once we shared our results with cultural organizations, they would beat a path to our door to assist us, but our experience has been quite different. For much of the last decade we've been involved in evaluating community arts initiatives in Philadelphia that have invested several million dollars in the sector. In spite of this support, however, community arts groups find it very difficult to complete relatively simple data-gathering—essentially sign-up sheets at events—that would improve our ability to document their participation. Originally we saw this as a lot of cases of individual failure, but now it seems to be deeply engrained in the systems through which we support community cultural providers.

### **The Tragedy of the Commons**

Small-budget cultural organizations are embedded in an arts scene that has become increasingly marketized over the past two decades. Artistic occupations are now clearly part of the “winner-take-all” economy described by Frank and Cook, in which a few stars gain a disproportionate share of the compensation. Indeed, during the last decade, only professional athletes have had a less equal distribution of earnings than artists' occupations. Public and philanthropic funders who used to see their task as compensating for the difficulty that smaller, socially conscious groups had in generating earnings, now often use fiscal rectitude and earned income as filters for identifying worthy and unworthy groups. Small cultural groups face increasing isolation and competition.

As a result, small groups with which we work see demonstrating their social impact as simply another cudgel that funders are likely to hold over them. Years ago, when we were just beginning this work, Mark attended a convening about cultural indicators at which a veteran cultural center director from Los Angeles stopped in the middle of the discussion to ask if this was just a “new hoop” that cultural programs were going to be asked to jump through in order to receive funding. At the time, Mark was irritated, but now we see that the program director was wiser than we realized. If civic engagement simply becomes a new hoop, the cultural sector will be poorly served.

The reason talk of civic impact leads to talk about “new hoops” is because the fate of individual arts programs rests, not on a recognition of the field's social contribution, but on its ability to demonstrate *its* individual contribution. If we could say that this individual group reduced social alienation or increased voting rates, we probably could get better cooperation, but if their data only allow us to demonstrate the arts' broad social value—not the program's individual magnificence—we're of little value to it.

This is the tragedy of the commons. To refresh your memory, W. F. Lloyd in an 1833 paper explained how individual English farmers who shared a common pasture land, because they saw the land as “free,” over-grazed it. Over time, it was degraded to the point that it was of no value to anyone. Eventually, the commons were en-

closed and a large part of the class of farmers that counted on it was liquidated.

There is a risk that a similar process could happen in the field of civic engagement and the arts. Let's use one concrete example. Several years ago we were asked by a local cultural group to undertake a community impact study. Sure enough, we were able to demonstrate a correlation between this group's activity and a set of positive social outcomes. If we had stopped there, we would have made the group very happy. Unfortunately, as social scientists, we felt called upon to “control” for a relevant variable—in this case, other cultural groups' activity in these areas. When we did so, the individual effect disappeared. It wasn't that this group made no contribution, far from it. But the social impact was a collective result of all of these organizations' work.

Suppose we hadn't felt called upon to control for the effect of other groups. As we've said, the individual group would have been happy. They might have broadcast the results. Other groups would commission community impact statements. Funders at the start would be thrilled that they could identify the groups that “really” were making a difference, but over time, they might start to wonder why all of these groups keep claiming the same social impact. Like much of the economic impact literature, we would breed a cynicism that this was another case of “lying with statistics.”

We aren't yet ready to answer the question about how we should remedy the situation. We certainly need a way of talking about small arts as more than a simple aggregation of individual programs. We need to think about it as a *field* in which individual organizations earn their keep, not by demonstrating their individual magnificence, but by being part of a larger enterprise. We can see other models of how *fields* like this get constituted: labor unions and professions come to mind. We're in no position to guess what form of collective organization would make sense for smaller arts groups and artists.

We do know, however, that if we persist in trying to exploit the commons rather than figure out how to exercise social control over it, the small arts sector is likely to follow in the footsteps of those English farmers who, when the commons was played out, had no choice but to find another line of work.

*Mark J. Stern is principal investigator and Susan C. Selfert is director of the University of Pennsylvania's Social Impact of the Arts Project. This talk was given at the Americans for the Arts conference in Philadelphia in June 2008.*